A Witcham Scrapbook 1897 to 1990

Facts, Features and (occasional) Fallacies
reported in Cambridge Newspapers

summarised by

Mike Petty

Many of these stories were featured in my 'Looking Back' column in the Cambridge News from 1996-2014. They are supplemented by some selections 'From our Old Files' published in the Cambridge Independent Press and other notes.

The complete 'Cambridgeshire Scrapbooks' of which this is a small section is published online at bit.ly/CambsCollection

I have digital and other copies of most of the stories summarised.
I hope to publish these online one day. If you would like them in the meantime then please get in touch.

The original volumes are housed in the Cambridgeshire Collection at Cambridge Central Library where there are many other indexes dating back to 1770.

They also have detailed newspaper cuttings files on over 750 topics that have been compiled since the 1960s.

Newspapers sometimes get things wrong. I copy things out incorrectly. Do check

There are a multitude of spelling and layout errors. Please forgive or correct them

News never stops but this file was finished on 31 August 2016.

I will maintain supplements and corrections – contact me for anything you need

Please make what use of these notes that you may. Kindly remember where they came from

See my website – www.mikepetty.org.uk for further notes.

Mike Petty, Stretham

2016

Witcham Scrapbook

1907 02 01
Within three miles of Witcham Gravel is another unique parish, that of Grunty Fen. It contains a population of 74, boasts of two railway stations, but has neither church, school, post office nor shop. The clergy of Stretham and Wilburton voluntarily minister to the spiritual needs as it is not within the limits of any ecclesiastical parish. 07 02 01b

1908 04 03
A Witcham labourer had been employed to look after the sluice doors of the Mepal catchwater drain. After he was dismissed the gates had frequently been obstructed. He was seen deliberately dropping pieces of brick into the sluice, preventing the doors closing automatically. In the event of a high tide it might have resulted in the flooding of the Fen lands, involving very heavy damage. He was fined the enormous sum of £100 plus costs. 08 04 03a

1911 04 21
Edward Peters, veterinary surgeon from Haddenham claimed damages from A.J. Pell of Wilburton Manor, (chairman of the Isle of Ely Quarter Sessions) in respect of a collision at Witcham Toll. Peters had been sitting in his cart outside the Horse and Gate when his dog ran in front of a motor driven by Pell and got entangled between the bonnet and the off side wheel. The vehicle swerved and collided with the cart, carrying it 60 yards and throwing out Mr Peters who was injured. Other motorists said the dog has also chased their vehicles and the case was dismissed. 11 04 21

1913 09 19
Harry Harper of Fern House, Witcham said he worked as a tailor and had a wife and five children. He earned very little money: last week it amounted to seven-and-six, the week before thirteen shillings; it averaged ten shilling a week. He had written to a Cardiff company to order chicken food but they'd sent a second batch he did not order

1922 06 09
At a special service held in Witcham Parish Church the Bishop of Ely dedicated a handsome brass memorial tablet, upon which was inscribed the names of the fifteen men of Witcham who gave their lives in the Great War. The Bishop asked that the memories of those who had fallen should always be revered, and that their sacrifices should not be in vain. It was our duty to keep the villages pure, sober, and Christian, and so be worthy of the lives which had been given.

1923 05 09
The quiet village of Witcham, near Ely, was startled on Sunday evening by rumours that a lad living in the village was missing, and supposed to be drowned. After many hours of dragging the body of a 14 year old farm labourer was taken from a pond in Hive close in the early hours of Monday morning. The coroner returned a verdict that the lad was found drowned. He said that although in villages there was often a large amount of stupid and not infrequently malicious gossip and scandal, which did a lot of mischief, there was on the other hand a most praiseworthy inclination to render assistance willingly and gladly to those who were in danger.

1924 07 17
Anxious to help their fund for the provision of a new Sunday schoolroom the Wesleyans of Witcham rose to the occasion when a garden fete took place in the Hall Gardens. Mrs McFall said Sunday schools of the present time were unlike those of years ago, when the younger children were taught in cellars beneath the churches. Little children looked to their teachers and they should set a good example by leading pure and holy lives

1924 09 24
Sidney Atkins lost some fowls from a hen house in a grass field on the Witcham Road, Mepal. The door was locked. It appeared to have been lifted off the ground. On the following morning PC Baker was passing the Ship Inn at Sutton, and looking over the wall saw some pullets which corresponded with those missing. Amid much struggling and crackling Atkins swore to each of the birds as he handed them to him out of a hamper.

1937 11 05
The cost of providing and maintaining Ely fire brigade and equipment was considerable and there should be payment if they were to attend fires in the rural area, councillors heard. Only Downham, Sutton, Witcham and Haddenham had fire fighting equipment but no one would work the Haddenham engine. The whole district was now connected to a water supply so parish councils should connect to the mains and erect stand pipes. But the Cambridge brigade had offered their services without any retaining fee and that would be cheaper. 37 11 05b

1938 04 08
Ely RDC discussed the large amount of water that continues to overflow from the water tower at Haddenham on to residents' gardens. Pipes could be put down to Grunty Fen, but people did not want it there. There was also the question of what the village would do if, in the event of war, the tower was struck by a bomb. But Mr Cross said that aircraft seldom hit their objective. Messrs Harding of Duxford's tender was accepted for the erection of three-bedroomed houses at Witcham but in future they should consider building two-bedroomed homes in view of the cost 38 04 08b & c

1938 06 03
The Isle of Ely Highways Department had since 1931 been cleansing four drains at Stretham, nine in Witcham and one in Sutton that had been set out in the Inclosure Awards as public drains. This work had been undertaken under a legal mistake and should have been done at the expense of the respective parishes. This meant a serious cost would now fall on the Rural Council. At Haddenham nothing had been done with the drains and those at Wentworth had not been touched for 50-100 years. Who was going to pay, Councillors asked 38 06 03b

1939 02 03
The new Cromwell School at Chatteris will accommodate 640 senior pupils from an area including Benwick, Manea & Witcham and be a recreational centre for young people and adults. It is one of the most modern schools with a separate department for boys and girls each with a hall equipped with a complete range of Swedish gymnastic apparatus. There are 'practical rooms' where boys will be taught handicrafts and girls housecraft and a clinic for medical inspection and dental treatment

1943 03 05
Waterloo Cup Winner, — The Waterloo Cup winner, Countryman, was bred and reared in the Isle of Ely by Miss I. Smith, of Witcham House Farm, Witcham. His present owner, Mr. T. Cronopolis, frequently visits the village, where he first saw the dog being put through its paces. He was interested, and later had him sent to Mr. John Wright, of Hope, near Wrexham, for his final training. Countryman is 20 months old and is the youngest dog ever .to have won the trophy.

1953 10 09
A former Witcham Toll boy, aged ten, who appeared before Ely juvenile court was said to have earned £2.5.0. a week looking after children's roundabouts at Hunstanton. He lived there with his parents and seven other children aged from three to 15 years in two small tents and a number of corrugated-iron sheds roughly knocked together and they had to crawl on all fours. It was altogether deplorable that children, man and wife should be permitted to live in such primitive circumstances.

1962 01 18
Witcham parish council can no longer bear the responsibility for the engagement and payment of a gravedigger. This is due to the continual rise in pay required by a man to do the work. The clerk says

this will mean that relatives will become responsible, but there is no doubt that undertakers would do it on their behalf. The decision comes into effect immediately. The council will continue their statutory duty of providing grave spaces.62 01 18a

1963 03 01
Restoration work at historic Yew Tree House at Witcham has revealed an inglenook fireplace and an ancient flight of stone steps behind a bricked up doorway covered by wallpaper and plaster. The steps simply peter out into another wall but may once have led to a priest's hole. The Vicar thinks that the foundations of the 17th-century house could well be as old as the church and legend says an underground passage may have run between them. There is a depression in the ground which might be a collapsed tunnel 63 03 01a

1964 05 07
Mrs D. Saberton & K. Sulman become first Witcham parish councillors for 70 years – 64 05 07b

1973 07 05
Nine days after a leaking drum of ethyl acrylate caused a scare in Cambridge, a five gallon drum of poisonous chemical was found in a field at Sutton - and it took officials six hours to move it to a safe place. It was sitting 10 feet from the main A142 road. The police had no responsibility to move the can. Neither had the fire service. It was finally removed in a local contractor's Morris 1000 pick-up truck and locked away in an isolated hut at Witcham sewage works. (The can, which was labelled "ethyl acetate", was later found to contain pond water)

1978 01 06
The impact of the tornado which unleashed tremendous energy, sufficient to rip up fully-grown trees along the edge of Newmarket cemetery and fling them about like bowling pins, was almost identical to tornado activity which occurred in May 1950 & caused considerable damage around Sutton and blew over a double-decker bus. Tornado tracks were plotted from near Hemel Hempstead, through Bedford, St Ives, Earith, Sutton, Witcham and Coveney. Cambridgeshire is a good tornado and thunderstorm region. The 50-odd destructive tornadoes in the British Isle from 1868 to 1950 were the most numerous in the eastern lowlands of England.

1981 01 06
Primary schools at Pymoor and Witcham may close next July; the Pymoor children will go to Lt Downham and the 35 pupils from Witcham will attend Mepal school. But Fen Drayton school may be given a temporary reprieve while councillors consider educational provision in the Fenstanton and Hilton area. 81 01 06a

1982 03 11
Fulbourn parents fighting the possible closure of the village infants' school say that if cuts are to be made then it is Great Wilbraham school which should be axed. Meanwhile Liberal MP Clement Freud has urged the Government to drop plans to close Witcham school; it has increased its roll from 27 to 30 in the happy, integrated and expanding village. It could be kept open with just one teacher, he claims. 82 03 11